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Hamlet An Actor

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BY

S. M. PERLMANN.

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1913.



To the Very Reverend,
The Hakam,
Rabbi Dr. M. Gaster
with Compliments
from

Hamlet An Actor

S. M. Perlmann
3/8/13

BY

S. M. PERLMANN.

LONDON:

R. MAZIN & CO., LIMITED,

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1913

DEDICATED

to

My Dear Daughter

Mrs. ANNIE PEVSNER

with affectionate love.

London, July 1st, 1913.

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HAMLET AN ACTOR.

It may be safely affirmed, I think, that no book, except the Bible, was fortunate enough to find so many interpreters and expounders as Shakespeare's Hamlet. Unfortunately, the commentators of both were fettered by maxims fixed a priori, which they dared not question, and were thus coerced to move in a narrow enclosure constructed by themselves and their predecessors. No wonder, then, that new interpreters eagerly wishing to detect new explanations in the Bible, or to find exceptionally psychological traits in the Shakespearian hero without deviating boldly from the trodden path, became induced to act after the ironical advice of Goethe:

"Im Auslegen seid frisch und munter!

Legt Ihr's nicht aus, so legt was unter."

Thus, when unable to find the texts answering their predetermined conceptions, they violated them and imputed to them all kinds of meanings, interpreting them as agreeing with their own imagination.

The student of a logical mind, who is

acquainted with the superabundant literature of the Bible and Hamlet exegesis, when reviewing it critically and unbiassed, must be greatly surprised to find an enormous amount of strange vagaries, accumulated at random, that are good enough only to satisfy the whims of their own authors.

Fortunately, as far as the Bible is concerned, the critics have made great progress in the last decades; they were intrepid enough to maintain as an axiom that science alone is the criterion for truth, and nothing recorded as a fact can claim to be recognised as such—no matter on what authority it claims to rely—if science proves the impossibility of such an occurrence. We may acknowledge with joy and satisfaction that this valiant principle has secured great advantages for the Bible students, by destroying the old narrow fence, and allowing them a free outlook.

It is regrettable to see most of the Hamlet interpreters clinging to the old traditions, and lacking vigour to emulate the Bible critics. The former dare not abandon the position once occupied, out of fear to profane the hero by looking at him from a somewhat lower point of view, as if it were a sacrilege to discover in the idolized hero human faults and human weaknesses. Therefore most of the Hamlet expositors only

differ one from another by the varying phrases and subtleties they use. We naturally find the theatre managers and actors on the retinue of the old expounders, trained as they were all their life to act mechanically, in accordance with the long-adopted, one-sided conceptions. They do not like to submit to new perceptions, which will needs compel them to study anew the difficult and refined part of the hero. It is perhaps impossible for them to re-shape the pantomimes, and to alter the mode of performing the part once inculcated, and to which they have become habituated.

But surely it will neither diminish the glory of the immortal Poet, nor prejudice his sublime drama, if I try to contemplate the famous tragedy of the Prince of Denmark from another point of view, viz. as a severe unrelenting criticism of the greatest dramatist, philosopher, and psychologist, Shakespeare, exercised in relation to his own histrionic abilities, in his capacity of an active member of the stage. *)

*) Nor can I assent to the opinion of the few critics, who, taking up an extremely hostile position (e.g., Voltaire and Dr. Benedix), denounce the tragedy of Hamlet as inartistic and a complete failure. I venture to say that my point of view of Hamlet as a versatile actor, playing different parts, affords a satisfactory explanation for many peculiar disharmonies the said critics objected to.

It would be really strange to admit that the greatest analyst of human passions and senses, the investigator of all possible motives of men's actions, the detector of their sources and their gradual movement and evolution, should have omitted to dissect the feelings and actions of such an interesting person as a philosophic actor, when distressed by great emotions. Shakespeare, being himself an actor with philosophic education, could not better portray himself with all his advantages and failings as a man and actor, than by personifying himself in Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. And so Shakespeare, wishing to create a stage hero in his own image, endowed Hamlet with all his own good qualities, at the same time criticising with acerbity all his own shortcomings. And certainly nowhere could Shakespeare find a better model for an actor in his histrionic capacity than in Hamlet of the saga. The story records that when Hamlet found his father Horwendil murdered by his brother Fengo, who seized the throne and married his victim's widow, Gerutha, he *feigned* madness. Here the most suitable substratum for histrionic display was already given, and it was merely necessary to adapt the actions of the *feigning* Hamlet to the particular traits of the living author himself, and so to draw his own portrait, studying at the same time the

human soul in every phase.

* *

Hamlet of the drama was modelled by the author to reflect his own likeness, and, like himself, made to be an actor of a sentimental-philosophic character, though born in a royal palace, and whose capacities, both as philosopher and actor, remained alike rudimentary, and did not mature sufficiently. His unripe philosophy being moreover sentimental, it made him to be an irresolute reasoner and speculator. Although sufficiently clever and shrewd to juggle with reasons pro and contra when discussing as a debater, he had no deep philosophic ripeness to settle on a firm philosophic standard, and to act accordingly. A philosophy, founded on a sentimental basis like his, could never be productive in a positive way, it could only express itself in a negative form, and caused Hamlet's inclination to despair. As an actor of tender affections, he was an easy prey to impressions affecting his feelings.—When, on returning to Elsinor, he found his father dead, and in the short time of two months his mother wedded to his uncle, he was disgusted, because the marriage, although sanctioned by law, was morally incestuous. At that time it was known neither to Hamlet nor to the queen that the old

king had been treacherously murdered. To Hamlet it was revealed by his father's ghost, while the queen receives the information from Hamlet, (Act 3, Sc. 4), and asks horror-stricken :

“As kill a king?”

which proves that the queen had not been an accomplice to the murder of her first husband. That the marriage was sanctioned by law the king accentuates, (Act 1, Sc. 2), in saying :

“Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
Together with remembrance of ourselves.
Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,

.
Taken to wife : nor have we herein barr'd
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along.”

There was no excusable reason for Hamlet attacking the king, but he was not philosophically deep enough to master his offended ethical feelings, and to disregard the outrage on convention perpetrated by his mother. In his despondency he lets his mind run to the idea of suicide, from committing which he was restrained by the canon of the Everlasting. He soliloquises, (Act 1, Sc. 2):

“Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter !”

Hamlet's nature being an amalgamation of

professional actor, who, lacking the talent of performance, his capacity being rather of a negative than positive kind, he could never have risen above mediocrity. He would always have remained—to speak with Lessing (Emilie Galotti)—a Raphael without arms, or as Dr. Herman Tuerck would say, a susceptible actor, genial in observing, genial in his imaginations, but devoid of genius in acting, i.e., in performing he would always have remained an amateur actor. That Hamlet knew all the fine particulars of histrionic theory, required for performing on the stage, his lesson given to the actors, (Act 3, Sc. 2), bears excellent testimony, but he was not an able performer himself, and most probably he, like all amateurs, tried now and then every kind of part, without succeeding in any of them. We may take it for granted that Shakespeare never intended Hamlet to personate an actor of great histrionic talent, but only a susceptible performer of a medium capacity.

The much-discussed, but never-decided problem, as to whether Hamlet was really mad, or feigned madness, is, from the point of view of conceiving Hamlet as a playing actor, solved, and ceases to be a question any more.*) Still, I

*) Thus perhaps also the queer contradiction in the ages assigned to Hamlet can be reconciled. Shakespeare,

presume that, because susceptible actors sometimes become so strongly influenced by the parts they are playing as to identify themselves with the character they are performing, it cannot always be discriminated whether Hamlet is insane or not, but when in a bad mood his mask would be transparent, and he would act out of character like a real *dilettante*; even when he was at his best, it was easy for the observer to recognise him as feigning. The king says (Act 3, Sc. 1):

“Love! his affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spake, though it lack’d

Was not like madness”. [form a little,

And Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the king asks
(Ibid):

“And can you, by no drift of circumstance,
Get from him why he *puts on* this confusion”.

Even Polónius, who insisted on declaring him mad by all means, and staked his head on his assertion, could not help saying (Act 2, Sc. 2):

in wishing Hamlet to be conceived as a playing actor, did not mind to introduce him as a youth, who intended to go back to school at Wittenberg, and soon afterwards as 30 years old, when conversing with the Sexton. Shakespeare allowed the actor to take the mask of an age more suitable to the part he was playing, and therefore he appears as a youth when he ought to show his fervent filial devotion, but as 30 years old when he was about to face Laertes like a hero.

“Though this be madness, yet there is
method in’t”.

It should be admitted, as it was also affirmed by many interpreters, that Shakespeare has set in Hamlet a monument to himself, and we may infer from the above quotations that the immortal and greatest of all dramatic poets, Shakespeare, was not satisfied with his own histrionic abilities, but was aware to be an imperfect exponent of action and character, and knowing best the failings he himself was subject to, he criticised them truculently. *)

We are ignorant as to whether Shakespeare, the world's most distinguished and able dramatist, has also been great as an acting player, or even above mediocrity, and we have to take into consideration the fact, that not one of his biographers is able to record anything exceptionally remarkable of his histrionic talent. It is even impossible to ascertain whether he was acting in different parts, or only in certain parts which he had created for himself. We infer, however, without fear of blunder, that he was not playing

*) Cf Sonnet 66:

“With mine own weakness being best acquainted,
Upon thy part I can set down a story
Of faults conceal'd, wherein I am attained;

.”

certain parts specially intended for him, but that he appeared in different parts according to demand, without excelling in any part, playing either badly, or at most as an actor of medium gifts, as a Raphael without arms, that is to say, like his Hamlet, of whom he was himself the prototype.

S. W. Fullom, in "The History of William Shakespeare", London, 1862, quotes Rowe, who says that "The top of his performance was the Ghost in his own Hamlet". Fullom, it is true, maintains that he used also to play the parts of several of the kings, but he fails to prove it.—K. Elze, in "William Shakespeare", says: "Experience teaches that an excellent theorist is by no means invariably equally excellent in practice; and we learn from Aubrey, that Ben Jonson was never a good actor, although an admirable teacher. Knight says: 'Not because Shakespeare was an actor he began writing dramas, but because, being a dramatist, he devoted himself to playing'. And Rowe says that Shakespeare soon became distinguished, 'if not as an extraordinary actor, yet as an excellent writer'".

Shakespeare-Hamlet was not only a rigorous critic of himself as actor, but he was apparently not less harsh in censuring his own social life; he alluded to it in saying to Ophelia (Act 3, Sc. 1):

“I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in”.

From the very outset, from the first moment his father's ghost exhorts him to avenge the treacherous murder, through his innate aversion to action, and being by nature a born actor, Hamlet's thoughts and aspirations are chiefly and firstly directed towards playing, and only in the second place, should an opportunity occur, to avenge his father's honour and life by killing his uncle, who had paved his way to the throne by incest and fratricide. All his actions were merely a study of different parts, and being little more than a dilettante, without superior talent, he tried his capacities now as leading stage lover, now as madman, then as intriguer, and even as cynical clown. Like a coquettish comedian thirsting for glory, he jumped into the grave dug for Ophelia, and in words suitable for a leading stage lover he exclaims (Act 5, Sc. 1):

“’S wounds, show me what thou’lt do:

Woo’t weep? Woo’t fight? Woo’t fast?

Woo’t tear thyself?

Woo't drink up eisel ? Eat a crocodile ?
I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine ?
To outface me with leaping in her grave ?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I :
And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart ! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
I'll rant as well as thou."

Do not these blustering phrases reveal the bragging comedian, when we remember that only a short time before he had told Ophelia, (Act 3, Sc. 1):

"I loved you not".

without considering how much these words must needs affect the simple, innocent, and loving nature of Ophelia, and might even ruin her life ? *)

*) But if we prefer to take the view of the few biographers, who, in their unnecessary and excessive veneration of the poet, consider themselves bound to assert that Shakespeare has been an excellent performer, it would only mean that Shakespeare, the excellent writer and player, did not criticise himself, but censured in this tragedy of weakness the acting dilettante in general. The view, that Hamlet is meant to be an active player, also affords ample reason why Shakespeare has chosen *this* drama to give a profound lesson to all the actors how "to suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (Act 3, Sc. 2), as otherwise such a lecture would be out of place in a deep tragedy.

Hamlet endeavoured to pretend madness as long as possible, but he could not carry the part through, and after succeeding for a short while in giving Polonius the impression of being insane by saying, (Act 2, Sc. 2):

“Excellent well; you are a fishmonger”.

he immediately speaks quite reasonably with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, continuing to be reasonable even when Polonius returns. In playing the part of the intriguer, he intends to assassinate the king, but lacking the courage to do it, he laments his irresolution, and reproaches himself with timidity, in the following words, (Act 2, Sc. 2):

“But I am pigeon-liver’d, and lack gall”.

He attempts to play the part of a performing clown, when, in the swearing scene, apostrophising the Ghost, (Act 1, Sc. 5):

“Ah, ha, boy! say’st thou so? art thou

there, true-penny?

Come on: you hear this fellow in the cellarage:

Well said, old mole! canst work i’ the

A worthy pioner! [earth so fast?

This cynicism is quite unbecoming! It would, certainly, always be incompatible with filial devotion and filial love, to mock the father’s spirit, but all the more so at that critical moment, when the ghost had revealed to him the treachery of his

uncle, the murderer, the usurper of the throne and seducer of his mother, exhorting him to avenge the horrible fratricide. To what purpose, we must ask, is Hamlet mocking the apparition? It is vile tomfoolery, and no more, quite inconsistent with his lesson given to the players of the travelling company, (Act 3, Sc. 2),

“And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them: for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered :”

Or may we dare to suppose, that Shakespeare, wishing to give a thoroughly useful lesson to the actor in general, introduced this scene intentionally to demonstrate how repulsive an impression it makes on a serious spectator of artistic taste, when the actor plays in a way, “to set some quantity of barren spectators to laugh, when some necessary question be then to be considered”? Must not such ridiculous phrases, when plainly comprehended, needs alienate our sympathy from a hero with such improper and frivolous behaviour?

I therefore maintain, that Shakespeare meant all Hamlet's actions to be performances, as a playing of parts. In all his thoughts and deeds,

Hamlet was only playing, and, being something of a philosopher, he endeavours to conceal his inherent weakness by sophistic reasons; a man of mere words, and no action, he deliberates perpetually, incessantly contriving reasons to excuse his inactivity. To him we can rightly apply the words of Al-Hafi to Nathan (Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*), "He who deliberates is only looking out for some plausible reason for abstaining".

In his enthusiasm for histrionic craft, Hamlet decides to make the stage his assistant, serving him as a detective. The play shall be the touchstone of his uncle's conscience, to discover whether he was really guilty or not. In his enthusiasm, he is even heedless of the great immediate danger which possibly menaces him in arraigning—though only metaphorically—his uncle before the assembled court, as his uncle might feel offended, and resent the audacity. But Hamlet the actor was unable to suppress his inborn histrionic proclivities, like a confirmed wag, who can never control himself, and abstain from a sarcastic pun, recklessly running the risk of being occasionally chastised for uttering it. Hamlet soliloquises, (Act 2, Sc. 2):

"I have heard

That guilty creatures sitting at a play

Have by the very cunning of the scene

that Horatio's common-sense will become an expedient for him eluding action. Horatio—he hopes—will contradict his deductions through his observations of the king's behaviour, and if Hamlet should find that the king had betrayed his guilt by his demeanour, he trusts to Horatio to declare his inferences as fallacious. He says to Horatio, (Act 3, Sc. 2):

“There is a play to-night before the king;
One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death;
I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe my uncle

And after we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming”.

When the final moment for the decisive test arrives, and the players begin the performance, Hamlet fails to behave himself aptly to harmonise with the almost sacred moment. He puts on a farcical-cynical mood, and his indelicate banter with Ophelia is quite unfit and inexcusable at this turning-point. His attitude in general, as well as his talking to the actors and to the audience during the play, is comprehensible only when we do not take Hamlet seriously, but as playing a part, or acting the Regisseur. And when the king leaves

the play, thus establishing his guilt beyond doubt, and Horatio does not even attempt to dispute the criminality of the king, where ought Hamlet's first thoughts to turn? One would expect Hamlet to rush after the king, and kill him outright in sight of the audience, and avenge his father in the presence of the whole court, but his thoughts are entirely occupied with his success as stage manager, and his vain-glorious triumph makes him rejoice and exclaim enthusiastically, (Act 3, Sc. 2):

“Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—
if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with
me—with two Provincial roses on my razed
shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of
players, sir”.

Horatio, comprehending and estimating rightly the dangerous position in which his friend has brought himself by this foolhardy act, disapproves of it by replying ironically, (ibid):

“Half a share”.

The answer offends Hamlet the actor; he cannot allow his histrionic ability not to be appreciated according to its deserts, and wrongfully criticised; he insists on having achieved a success by answering, (ibid):

“A whole one”.

Intoxicated with his success on the stage,

and his vanity satisfied for the moment, he seemingly forgets all and everything; he does not think of the treacherous murder of his father, nor of the revenge it imposed on him. Had he not looked upon all this as mere trifles of little importance, he ought, if not to kill the king on the spot, at least request his friend Horatio to consider, together with him, the proper means for carrying out the duty of revenge. But to Hamlet the actor, the chief thing is the performance, and, as it has turned out a success, he is satisfied for the present as stage manager, and does not care for the part of playing the avenger, or even perhaps forgets it altogether. He shouts in raptures, (*ibid*):

“Ah, ha ! come, some music ! come,

the recorders !

Who knows what Hamlet the actor might have undertaken at this juncture, full of threatening danger, had not his mother summoned him. This invitation awakened him, and brought him back to reality, reminding him of his duty to accomplish the task entrusted to him: He felt uncomfortable, like a sleeping man shaken up and disturbed in the middle of a sweet dream. This peevish irritation finds expression in his angry soliloquy, (Act 3, Sc. 2):

“ . . . Now could I drink hot blood,

And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft ! now
to my mother,
O heart, lose not thy nature ; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom : ”

He, maybe, just referred to the matricide Nero because of his being, in a certain regard, like himself, an actor by nature, and, by the way, an Emperor into the bargain.

On his way to his mother Hamlet discovers the king at prayer, and he is overcome by a strong desire to assassinate him ; he even goes so far as to express his determination to accomplish the deed by saying :

“And now *I'll do't*”,

but here again his courage, though strongly worded, forsakes him when activity is required. It would be indeed a useless achievement for Hamlet the actor to kill the king when he is alone with him, without any spectators present to applaud his piece of bravery, and when no laurels could be gained. He therefore puts his sword in the scabbard, and, true to his habit, Hamlet again exerts his sophistic, philosophic mind to find an excuse for his tergiversation. He soliloquises, (Act 3, Sc. 3):

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying ;
And now *I'll do't* : and so he goes to heaven ;

And so am I avenged. That would
be scann'd :

A villain kills my father ; and, for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.

O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
He took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as
flush as May ;

And how his audit stands who knows
save heaven ?

But, in our circumstance and course of
thought,

'Tis heavy with him : and am I,
then, reveng'd,

To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage ?
No.

Up, sword, and know thou a more
horrid bent :

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed ;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't ;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick
to heaven,

And that his soul may be as damn'd
and black

As hell, whereto he goes. My
mother stays:

This physic but prolongs thy sickly days."

This effusion of sophistic, almost ridiculous phrases, is obviously contrived for self-delusion, to palliate his inaction; witness his deed just immediately after these arguments were uttered: Hamlet, supposing the king behind the tapestry in his mother's room, draws his sword and stabs Polonius; he does not wait to find the king "drunk" or in "rage" or in "incestuous pleasure", although the king he imagined to be behind the arras was just coming from prayer. Hamlet does not hesitate this time, because there is his mother to provide an audience for applauding his cowardly deed, and he is longing for laurels alone. Where there was no hope of success, he evaded every quarrel; he did not even blush to defend himself before Laertes, (Act 5, Sc. 2), with

"Sore distraction",
and with subterfuges like

"If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away",
or

"Hamlet denies having wrong'd Laertes".
Although he was "but mad in craft", he killed Polonius, intentionally taking him for the king. He says with contemptuous jeers, (Act 3, Sc. 4):

“I took thee for thy better: take
thy fortune”.

The Ghost, knowing Hamlet's thoughts, and being aware that he has ceased to think seriously of avenging him, reappears to exhort Hamlet once more, urging him on with, (Act 3, Sc. 4):

“Do not forget. This visitation

Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose”.
Hamlet was merely playing, and nothing more, and all his thoughts and actions were directed towards it, and executed or suppressed in accordance with the requirements of the role he was then playing.

* *
* *

Two important actions, although devised and arranged by Hamlet, were executed by others at his order, and only once was he active himself. The performance before the king, and the equipment and preparation of the pirate ship, were both designed by Hamlet and executed by others, and only the treacherous exploit against his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in exchanging the king's letter by his forgery, which caused their death, was his own achievement. That Hamlet himself was meant to be the

contriver and disposer of the counterplot of equipping the pirate vessel, we learn from his own words, (Act 3, Sc. 4). He says to the queen :

“There’s letters seal’d : and my two
schoolfellows,

Whom I will trust as I will adders fang’d,
They bear the mandate ; they must

sweep my way,
And marshal me to knavery. Let it work ;
For ’tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petar : and’t

shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below

their mines,
And blow them at the moon : O, ’tis
most sweet

When in one line two crafts directly meet”.
These “two crafts directly” can only refer to the counterplot, and mean being taken prisoner by the pirates. It cannot be interpreted as relating to the letter of Urias substituted by Hamlet instead of the king’s, as this trick entered his mind much later, suddenly, without deliberation, and unexpectedly. He relates to Horatio, (Act 5, Sc. 2):

“Rashly,
And prais’d by rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves so well

When our *deep plots* do fail ;”

This proves that there were “deep plots”, which possibly might fail, and therefore, because the capture of Hamlet was a pre-arranged affair, he, the ever-lazy, the ever-hesitating, unexpectedly abandons philosophy, which he habitually uses as shield and shelter for doing nothing, and is in the front of action to grapple with the ship of the pirates. Therefore he could also write to Horatio, (Act 4, Sc. 6):

“They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy : but *they knew what they did* ;”

Only on the supposition that the whole pirate affair was a pre-arranged plot, is it comprehensible why Hamlet alone was taken prisoner ; why the ship was not ransacked, and why the pirates, instead of dragging him to a foreign place and selling him as a slave, so regardfully landed him on the shores of his own country. It was a diplomatic trick, ingenuously designed by Hamlet, but executed by his hirelings, the pirates, while he himself could never consummate a heroic deed. The sole action he ever completed was the felony perpetrated against his innocent schoolmates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who were devoted to him, and gave him their company out of sheer love. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had not the slightest idea of the

murderous intentions of the king, and even Polonius was not privy to the contents of the letter to England. The king says to Polonius, (Act 3, Sc. 1):

“ . . . He shall with speed to England,
For the demand of our neglected tribute :”

And Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were commissioned by the king, (Act 2, Sc. 2):

“To draw him on to pleasures, and
to gather,
So much as from occasion you may glean,
Whether aught to us unknown afflicts
him thus,

That open'd lies within our remedy.”

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hoped and sincerely believed their action would promote Hamlet's recovery, as they say to the queen, (ibid):

“Heavens make our presence and our practices pleasant and helpful to him!

and when interrogated by him as to whether they had been sent for, they did not even try to mislead him, to deny it or to conceal it, but were candid with him like good comrades. Hamlet himself did not even pretend to be convinced of his friends being guilty of treason against him, but he did not care about the consequences, and when Horatio questions him reproachfully, (Act 5, Sc. 2):

“So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to’t”,
he did not reply by charging them as traitors,
but disavows responsibility for their fate by the
phrase, (ibid):

“Why, man, they did make love to
this employment;
They are not near my conscience;
their defeat

Doth by their own insinuation grow:”
without as much as attempting to prove the
truth of it.

Hamlet did not forsake his character of
an ambitious actor, from his first appearance
at Helsingor, till his last breath, and only stage-
triumphs, successes, and applause did he consider
as a purpose and goal worth striving for.

Hamlet already commenced playing at
the swearing scene; he says to his friends,
mimicking and playing as if he were on a stage
platform *) (Act 1, Sc. 5):

How strange or odd so e’er I bear myself—

*) This scene has no meaning at all if not
inserted as a role for Hamlet the actor, for else, we
may ask, for what purpose does Hamlet communicate to
all his friends his intention to put on an antic disposition?
For as they were made to swear not to betray anything
about the ghost, he could rather pass as being really
mad, and not as merely feigning it.

As I, perchance, hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on.—

That you, at such times seeing me,

never shall,

With arms encumber'd thus, or this head shake,

Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,

As 'well, well, we know', or 'we could

an we would'

Or 'if we list to speak', or 'there be

an if they might',

Or such ambiguous giving out, to note

That you know aught of me".

And he continued playing when intruding into Ophelia's room in farcical costume. Ophelia reports, (Act 2, Sc. 1):

"Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all

unbrac'd ;

No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,

Ungarter'd, and down-gyved to his ankle",

The itinerant company of players Hamlet encounters with great enjoyment, and accosts them with the amicable words, (Act 2, Sc. 2):

"You are welcome, masters ; welcome all".

He interrogates them with great interest for particulars of their worldly success, and feels in their company as among his equals. He addresses them an invitation to recite some piece, saying, (ibid):

“We’ll have a speech straight”.

But his histrionic nature is awakened, and he begins to declaim himself, for he could not restrain his inclination for playing even for a moment, till the players would commence to rehearse.

Hamlet, like all other professionals, who always use, metaphorically, the language of their habitual calling, would figuratively use expressions referring to playing and the stage, as when reporting to Horatio the details of his purloining the documents that were in the possession of Resencrantz and Guildenstern, and of his forging the letters, he thus describes the event, (Act 5, Sc. 2):

“Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play”.

and to his mother he says, (Act 1, Sc. 2):

“For they are actions that a man
might play”.

It was also his irresistible propensity for playing that brought on his ruin, and caused his death. Out of pure vanity, to make a show of himself, he was caught by the king’s trick into accepting the fencing-match with Laertes, although being well aware that Laertes was his enemy, and that the king was constantly luring him, and conspiring against his life. He did not pay

attention either to his own presentiments, nor did he allow himself to be dissuaded by Horatio, who told him, (Act 5, Sc. 2):

“You will lose this wager, my Lord”.

and accepted the match, in order to find an opportunity for appearing before an audience as a performer.

I repeat, Hamlet was a born and incarnate actor of a weak and cowardly character; he could act only behind shelter, and disguised with the possibility of explaining away his deed; in case he should be made responsible for, and be threatened with it, and even this when there was success to be hoped for. But when playing his parts under favourable conditions, with laurels and applause in sight, he did not choose between the parts the one that suited him best, but played every role, and all badly. Nor did he then care for the consequences; it was a matter of indifference to him whether he appeared before Ophelia with “stockings foul’d” playing the madman, or impersonating the intriguer and assassin before his mother, (he did not mind shedding blood and did not even feel any remorse for killing the innocent Polonius), or producing himself before Laertes in the role of a sentimental leading stage lover. He played whenever there was an opportunity to play; even his trite trick

against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern smells of insipid stage scenery, and no less adverse to good taste is his letter to Ophelia, (Act 2, Sc. 2):

“To the celestial, and my soul’s idol.....In
her excellent white bosom.....Thine ever-
more while this machine is to him.”

no serious philosophically-minded man, no matter how ardent his love may be, could write in such a vulgar style; it is the style of a cynical actor. The nature of the born actor cannot be fettered, and can never be suppressed by him, even at the most critical moments of his life; the actor’s mind is always alive to playing, incessantly directed to, and occupied with, studying parts. Thus the celebrated Talma, weeping at the hearse of his dearly-beloved son, secretly listened to his own moanings in order to make use of them on the stage.

Hamlet himself was conscious of his weakness, making merry of, and mocking, the ridiculous apologies he assigned for not killing the king. He says, (Act 4, Sc. 4):

“A thought which, quarter’d, hath

but one part wisdom,

And ever three parts coward”.

From the first revelation of the ghost, the charge imposed upon him was a burden to him,

even before he had tried whether it would be difficult for him to accomplish it or not. Indeed, he had scarcely promised the ghost to avenge him, (Act 1, Sc. 5):

“Haste me to know’t, that I, with
wings as swift
As mediation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.”

when he already exclaimed, wailing, (ibid):

“The time is out of joint : O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set is right !

Hamlet had neither the presence of mind nor energy to protest against being banished from Denmark, but submitted without a struggle to the king’s command. His laziness was so intense, that even his thoughts of revenge had to be stimulated by others, for he scolds himself, (Act 4, Sc. 4):

“How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge !”

He was incited by the tears of the player shed for Hecuba ; he was spurred by the opportunity offered him when he saw the king at prayer ; he was goaded by the enterprise and exploit of Fortinbras, and stimulated by learning the king’s command to murder him. His courage did not suffice more than—as he describes it ironically but correctly—when accusing

himself of cowardice, (Act 2, Sc. 2):

Must, like a whore, unpack my heart
with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!"

Hamlet as actor must be taken to be as naturally chivalrous, pure and noble, to which the king himself bears witness in saying, (Act 4, Sc. 7):

" . . . he, being remiss,
Most generous, and free from all
contriving".

Horatio also testifies to it, (Act 5, Sc. 2):

"Now cracks a noble heart".

and lastly, Fortinbrass passes a favourable judgment upon him, (ibid):

"For he was likely, had he been put on,
T'have prov'd most royally".

The vicious and disgraceful actions he only perpetrated as parts in his playing.

I will conclude my essay with the modified sentence of Shakespeare:

"Inactivity, thy name is Hamlet!"

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